TRANSCRIPT—BILL RHODES

Interviewee: Bill Rhodes

Interviewer: Phoebe Holler

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Phoebe Holler: If you could say your name for me.

Bill Rhodes: Bill Rhodes.

PH: And you went to Carter—.

BR: I went to South French Broad from 1965 through ’68—no, ‘66 through ‘68.

PH: And did you play any sports there?

BR: No. Yeah, I ran Track.

PH: What event was it?

BR: I ran the four-forty. It used to be four hundred and forty yards, now it’s four hundred meters, I’d say.

PH: While you were at South French Broad, were there any teachers that made a big impact on you?

BR: Yes, Mrs. Forney. She taught Sociology, I think. And Mr. Baldwin taught U.S. History.

PH: Did you like History when you were in school?

BR: Yeah. I still like history as a matter of fact.

PH: So you said you were in Track, but was football a big thing?

BH: Yeah. Football was the big thing with the Bears. They were the Stephens-Lee Bears and when they came to South French Broad, it was still the South French Broad Bears.

PH: Were there any big rival games that you remember?

BR: We played Lee Edwards, that was the first year that we were allowed to play them because of segregation, and we lost. Yeah, it is too bad.

PH: And did they ever integrate South French while you were there?

BR: No, South French Broad went from the twelfth grade through the eighth grade. It was basically a holding facility until integration could come to fruition. Because they integrated starting in elementary school and then they worked their way up to the high school.

PH: So, I know football games were a big thing. Were there any clubs you were a part of?

BR: No, I didn't join any clubs. I wasn't voted the most anything. I just went there and had a good time.

PH: Were there any friends, a friend group that you stayed with throughout high school?

BR: I just had a best friend and that was Jimmy. We all gathered at the girl's Y. They had a little place, I think it was called the Green Hornet, we used to go to after school and dance. Socialize.

PH: So was dancing a big thing, going to dances?

BR: Yeah. Dancing was always a big thing. We called it swing dancing and then they came along with the Boogaloo and other dances.

PH: Which one was your favorite?

BR: I liked the Boogaloo. I'd show you how to do it but—.

PH: Tell me more about Jimmy.

BR: Jimmy was my childhood friend. He passed a couple years ago. He was a fine fellow. He played football. He was captain of the football team. He went in the Marine Corps., went to Viet Nam and he came out. He was just a good guy. We drifted apart after that, we both had families to raise.

PH: Did you come back to this reunion for any specific reason?

BR: Yeah, because I'm alive.

PH: That's a celebration in itself.

BR: Fifty years. I went to our thirty year reunion. I skipped ten and twenty. I went to thirty and I'm here for fifty. I said I'll come to this one.

PH: Do you still live in the Asheville area?

BR: I live in Black Mountain.

PH: Have you always lived in Black Mountain?

BR: No, I lived in Asheville.

PH: What can you tell me about when Martin Luther King passed away and JFK passed away? Did that have any implication on your schooling?

BR: I went to an integrated school, David Miller, the year JFK was assassinated. I can remember that, I think I was in the eighth grade. I was in the twelfth grade when Martin Luther King was assassinated and we had a White English teacher, I think her name was Miss Sams. And one of the people I never thought she'd say, 'We're not going to do any work today in honor of Martin Luther King.' It was a good idea at the time but that was just a little ( ) thing. We were back on the books the next day.

PH: Do you think that going to school provided a good community for you?

BR: Yeah, going to school was the only community. Like I said, we were in eighth grade through twelfth, that was the community.

PH: And it was the same people throughout all of your schooling, more or less?

BR: Well, I went sophomore, junior and senior years at South French Broad. I think in seventy-one it became Asheville Middle School. Fifty years after I went to Asheville Middle School, they tore it down and they built a new Middle School. It was fifty years after it was open. It was a brand new school, it was nice. They had nice labs, plenty of room, everything was spic-n-span. It was good.

PH: Did you have any siblings who went to school with you?

BR: My sister went to integrated schools. I'm the one who chose to come back to South French Broad. I could've gone to Lee Edwards. But after I did two years at David Miller during integration, I thought that ought to be enough for Martin Luther King and all his integration. I did my thing.

PH: Was there any reason besides, were you just frustrated with the way that things were going, that's why you went out of the segregated school?

BR: No, I had to go. Some people were in our year and they were going to integrate, like I said, it was an interval integration, so it was time to integrate the eighth to ninth grade middle school. So instead of going to Hill Street which was an all Black middle school, I did the eighth and ninth grade at David Miller. That's how I missed my freshman year here, because I went to the ninth grade in—.

PH: And then once you went to South French Broad, did you like that better than David Miller?

BR: About the same. Truthfully, I did. We had the people that were from a certain section called East End, we all went over there. We liked it. Maybe a twentieth of the population. It was good. The teachers were good. I won a spelling bee in eighth grade. I couldn't believe it. I could spell. I remember the word that tripped me up was muscle. I said, 'M-U-S-C-E-L.' 'No, that's not it, it's L-E.' I was the last one up and they were just giving me words to spell and I never thought it would trip me up but it did.

PH: Did you do anything like that once you got into high school?

BR: In high school I just basically went through high school. Took the required courses and graduated on time. It was an accomplishment.

PH: I'm in my senior year.

BR: I'd hate to be going to school now.

PH: After South French Broad, what did you do from there?

BR: I went in the Air Force for four years.

PH: That's incredible. Thank you.

BR: Then I got out of the Air Force, met my wife. I went to A.B. Tech for a couple years for machine shop tool and die. Worked at Singer Kearfott in Swannanoa, then I worked for Carolina Power and Light Company, then I worked for the state, I worked at Juvenile Evaluation Center until they closed.

PH: What is the Juvenile Evaluation Center?

BR: See, you don't even know. You know what a women's prison is in Swannanoa? All that used to be for juveniles. They took over all the buildings then they closed it.

PH: What it to help rehabilitate juveniles who were in detention?

BR: It was to habilitate because they couldn't read. I worked down as a hearing officer and behavioral specialist and I worked wings. We had like sixteen kids on a wing. Basically made sure they got up on time, checked for contraband, did groups with them. If they got in trouble, they would come to me because I was a hearing officer and I would

judge whether, what the infraction was good or bad. You can imagine whichever side I took, either the staff were mad at me or the kid. All in all it was good. We started positive behavior support at the end. I think we were making a breakthrough with that, like learning skills like permission skills, communication skills. And they closed it. Because not many kids from Buncombe County were there. It was a model to get kids closer to their home. Most of our kids came from Charlotte, Greensboro, down that way.

PH: What inspired you to work with that program?

BR: I don't know, I was a Sunday School teacher and they used to come to Bible School and you know how people say the Lord led me down there? I'm going with that.

PH: Were you pretty involved with the church and youth groups?

BR: Yeah. I did that. I did about thirty years at a Sunday School, Bible School and youth groups. I just turned the youth groups maybe five or ten years ago to a guy that actually was in my youth group and it was wonderful. I was ready to go.

PH: So you have your sister. Can you tell me about your parents?

BR: My parents lived in—we called it South Asheville, now they call it Kenilworth. It was a little segregated part. My dad worked at the V.A. Hospital and my mom worked at Buck's Restaurant.

PH: That was out on Tunnel Road?

BR: Yeah. And they basically raised us, put food on the table, and gave us shelter. After that, that was it. But we had a good life.

PH: And because you lived in a segregated area and then you went to South French Broad, how do you think segregation affected you, your schooling and growing up?

BR: I tell you, during segregation, if you see those pictures on the wall over there with all the teachers and everybody that saved people's lives? At least we had, we could identify with them, you know? They had a concern for us.

PH: Right, because they were going through it too.

BR: Integration—eighth and ninth grade we were just—you'd have to have been there. A lot of it was in my head, but the teachers were, they were pretty fair. It was like being thrown into a pond, tread water looking for a safe place to swim to.

PH: Yes, it was a big social experiment. They didn't have anything figured out. They were just like, 'Okay—'

BR: They tried. Like I said, they started with first grade and integrated the elementary, then the junior, then the last step to the senior. Then they closed our high school and made it a middle school and everybody went to Lee Edwards and they changed the name of Lee Edwards to Asheville High.

PH: And that's what it is now.

BR: That's what it is, Asheville High.

PH: Have you been back there to see it at all? Asheville High? I know you didn't go there but—.

BR: I went to a football game, a couple football games. With security the way it is, I had no reason to go. I don't think they would say, 'I want to come and look around.' They'd say, "Nooo.'

PH: And so you met your wife after you graduated. Do you have any children?

BR: I have two children. I and a girl and a boy, eight years apart. I was wondering if I was ever going to have another child because my wife was about to swear off of children after the first. But the Lord was gracious and gave me a son. Both of them went through college. My son's an engineer. He went to N.C. State. My daughter went to North Carolina A & T and got a degree in communications. Both of them are out with families and on their own.

PH: Do you see them on holidays?

BR: Yeah. We're all going to the beach Sunday. We're going out to St. Simon's Island in Georgia. I've never been. I've looking forward to it. It's about a five or six hour drive from here.

PH: Did you ever go to the beach on vacation when you were younger?

BR: No. We didn't even have a swimming pool. We had one little swimming pool at Walton Street Park. I think they integrated the Rec Park pool, I don't know when.

PH: Probably too late.

BR: I remember that we had one little pool, the Walton Street.

PH: Did a lot of people go there?

BR: Yeah. Everybody that was Black went there. It was called Southside, just down where Mission Hospital and all that took over out there and that was before the housing projects like Livingston Heights, Hillcrest. Lee Walker Heights was the first housing complex and they just tore down all houses, most of them and they put people in there.

PH: If there was one thing that you could remember about growing up during the desegregation time in Asheville, what would it be? If you're telling your grandchildren about something you remember.

BR: One thing? I'm trying to think of one thing. One thing was just living through it. That was the whole thing. Going to school, just like other people do but now it's mapped out what you're going to do. I kept going through different little changes, like go here in middle school, go here in high school. Now you know where you're going. So just the preparation for that, we didn't have any preparation. It just happened. It just started unfolding and that was it.

PH: Was there any particular reason that you went to the Air Force after high school?

BR: Well my brother was in the Air Force, my uncles were in the Air Force, so I thought I'd give it a shot.

PH: I want to fly helicopters.

BR: Do you want to go in the Army?

PH: I was looking at the United States Naval Academy and maybe through the Marines. We'll see.

BR: Nothing wrong with it if that's what you like.

END OF INTERVIEW.